

# THE UN-CHRISTIAN side of the INDIAN CHURCH

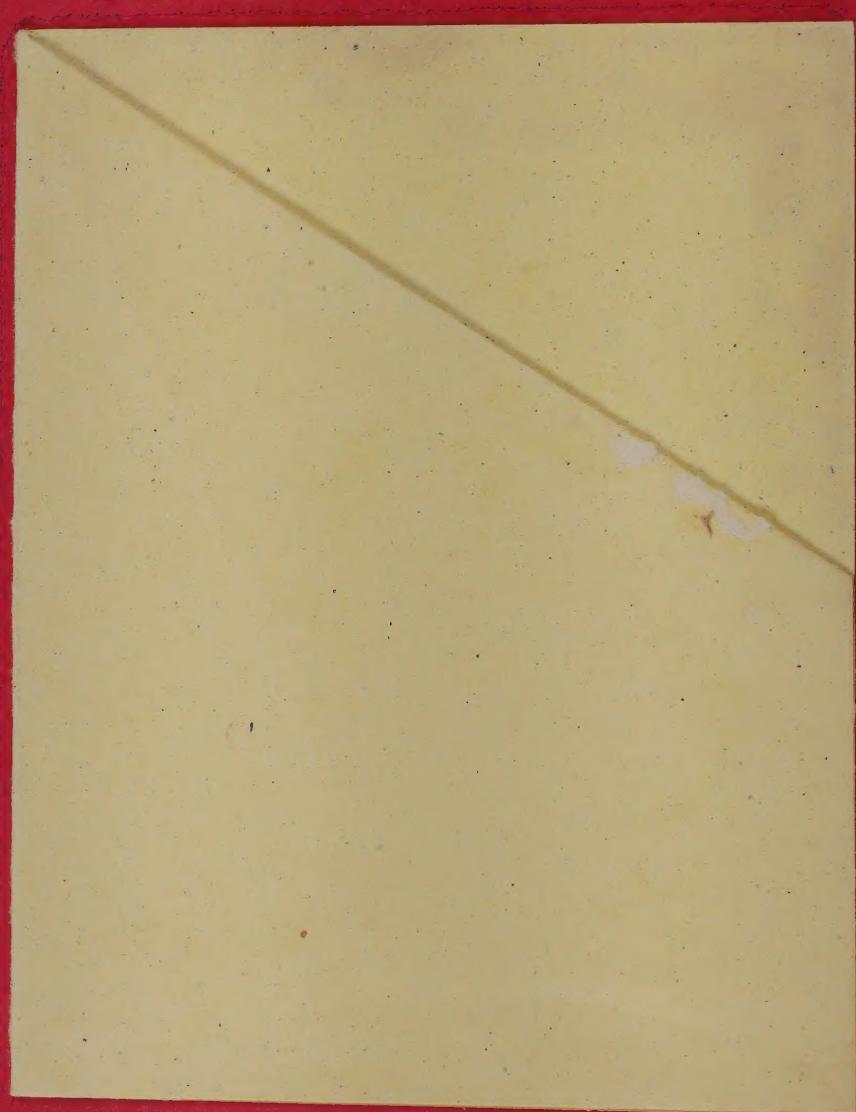
(*The Plight of the Untouchable Converts*)

**The Rev. M. Azariah**

1985

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## FOREWORD

At the time of writing this a big controversy is raging in the Indian Press, owned by its Ruling Class, over a New York-dated Indian news agency report criticising an American church organisation's TV film picturing India as a land of 3 Ds : "Division, Despair and Death," blaming Hinduism for these ills and saying only Christ can rescue this beleagured country of 800-millions.

The Indian Ruling Class led by its less than 3% Brahmins has to say this because it is badly exposed in America, the very citadel of world capitalism, where its heart is. It is naturally upset by this exposure of the truth. So it will do its best to cover up its sins. But speaking on behalf of India's vast Untouchables (20%) and tribals (about 10%) we can say that the Virginia-based "Dayspring International" has done a great service to this country by this naked exposure of the Hindu cruelty, the Gandhian hypocrisy. If India is what it is today—a sick nation, a sick people—it is because of Hinduism—a fascist ideology, noted for its violence.

The American TV film has projected "the gospel of Christ as the only hope for the hapless Indians." If this is so, why the Christian population has not gone up beyond 3% in the past several centuries since Christianity came to India? The French monk, Abbe J. Dubois, had predicted a century back that though there was a harvest field among the Untouchables and tribals the Church cannot convert the high caste Hindus. Why? This question is very well answered by the Rev. M. Azariah, General Secretary of the Church of South India Synod, Madras, representing the largest part of the Protestant population of India.

The Indian counterpart of a Black theologian, Azariah, himself a Tamil Untouchable convert from a village near Madras city in India's east coast, is one of those rare rebels among the Indian Church leaders who is thoroughly disillusioned by the way this gospel of Christ is taken to the people. Right now only the Untouchables, and tribals, who constitute the poorest among India's 50% of the population living below the poverty line (a rupee income a day), who are urgently in need of this gospel. Those belonging to higher castes are not interested in quitting Hinduism because, though poor, they are not oppressed. That is why over 75% of the Christians are from the Untouchable communities. They are disgusted with Hinduism because caste division has the divine sanction, a theological foundation in Hinduism. But these converts, who embraced Christianity to get out of the suffocating gas chamber of Hinduism, are once again discriminated within the Church. While it is true that the Hindu fascist religion does not tolerate any Hindu working for the destruction of caste system of which the Untouchables are the principal victims, the Church has produced some leaders like Azariah who are fighting within the Church against the injustice done to the converts.

This liberalism does not go beyond that though rebels like Azariah are a suspect even within the Church. Because most of the Church leaders, bishops, etc., are high caste converts and their value system is one with that of the Brahmins and hence un-Christian if not anti-Christian. It is these Christian leaders who maintain close relationship with international church organisations and get funds for the "economic uplift-of India's poor". But the problem of India's poor or even the poor Christians is not economic but social and cultural. Mother Teresa and those like hers run charity institutions that render economic aid or health services. What the poor, particularly the Untouchables, tribals need is not relief but revolution. Giving a fish to a

hungry person may solve his hunger temporarily. But he will come to beg for fish when he is hungry again. So instead of giving a fish and making him a beggar, teach him how to catch a fish and he will make a livelihood out of that. Christian institutions through their charity are making beggars out of our people. And this is what the Brahmins want. And so also the Brahmin Christians who control India's Church. It is only when our people remain as beggars these Brahmins and Brahmin Christians can come with their charity-kit and pose as our saviours. But what the India's Untouchables and Untouchable converts want is not reform but revolution. (Read: "Christians: Whom are they serving?" Dalit Voice Sept. 1, 1984 editorial).

India's Ruling Class views Christians with great suspicion. India's Hindu Nazi party has listed Christians among the three internal threats facing the country. While on one side it is very critical of Christians and putting all sorts of hurdles, it is this Ruling Class that is making full use of the Christian facilities particularly its educational institutions. The Ruling Class sends its children only to convents and other colleges run by Christians because they are exclusive, expensive, and hence can afford higher academic standards. Private schools for the rich and Government schools for the poor: The notorious Hindu double-standards aided and abetted by the Church. Not only the Untouchables and tribals but even those who get converted to Christianity have no chance to get admission into these institutions which are reserved for the Ruling Class. That is why we say Christians are serving the Ruling Class and not the Christ. This is what Azariah laments in this book.

If the Christians want to impress the Untouchables that Christ is living within them, and not those rich high castes of India, and thus win their love, they must introduce reservations to converted Untouchables, give free education,

free food, hostel and put them under the charge of committed priests and nuns. Preference may be given to "merited" Untouchable Christians in giving such reservations. Introduction of such a reservation to Untouchables – already being implemented by the Government, though half-heartedly, is within the power of the Church. Only thing is it must have the heart. This is a practicable suggestion and many top Church leaders, Christian educators, both Indian and foreign, have agreed with us.

If the Christians want to win over the Untouchables, it is possible only if they convince them that the Church assures them equality – not charity. If the Church has failed to increase its followers in India, it is because of this failure. The warning given by Rev. Azariah, who belongs to this rare breed of Church leaders, rejecting reform for evolution, should be taken seriously by the World Council of Churches, the Vatican and other international Church organisations who have a duty to pull up and correct the wayward Indian Church. Otherwise, a day will soon come when the Untouchable Christians will revolt if not reject the Church. And please note, they form the majority. Already such rumblings are heard.

This edited portion of Azariah's text is taken from the September, 1984 issue of the *South Indian Churchman*. The article was found so useful that we thought it needed wider circulation through a booklet. This incidentally is our first publication on the problem of Untouchable converts to Christianity.

Offers to translate this work to Indian languages are welcome.

V. T. Rajshekhar

Bangalore, India  
March 1, 1985

## **The Un-Christian side of the Indian Church**

### **I. Introduction :**

Of the total of about 20-million Christians of all denominations in India today, about 16-million are Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) and about 2 to 3 million Scheduled Tribes converts. But such a vast majority of people from one of India's significant religious minorities was being subjected to blatant injustice and discrimination based on religion by the Government of India that claims to be a secular, socialist and democratic republic. This constitutionally invalid discrimination against a section of its citizens arises from the Presidential Order No. 19 of 1950. This Order in paragraph No. 3 states : 'Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph No. 2, no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu or Sikh religion shall be deemed to be a member of the Scheduled Caste'. The implication of this Order is that the constitutionally provided privileges and compensatory benefits to the socially and economically oppressed sections of India's population called 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs) are denied to those professing the Christian religion. Behind this religious discrimination against Christianity is the assumption that Christianity does not recognise caste divisions and so the Christians of SC origin are not eligible to the social handicap benefits in the form of reservations and social handicap benefits in the form of reservations and concessions for employment and educational opportunities and for reserved seats in the legislature. But then even Sikhism as a religion does not recognise caste divisions and theoretically eliminates the ideas of caste. And yet the Presidential Order recognises the existence of caste divisions within the Sikh religion but not in Christianity. It is this

discriminatory treatment meted out to as many as 16-million Christians, we must fight against and if necessary by other legal means. Already a Congress member of Parliament, G. S. Reddy, had introduced a private Bill seeking deletions of this obnoxious para No. 3. But nothing came of it and so P. J. Kurien, M.P., introduced on February 26, 1980, another Bill for the same purpose which is still pending before Parliament. Meanwhile, a Madras-based voluntary organisation, Society for Social Action, has gone to the Supreme Court in November 1983, against this unconstitutional discrimination. But the official Church itself had only been making mere representations to the Government. Only in the Madras diocese a different method was followed in 1979 through a 5-hour long silent procession of over 20,000 people marching through the streets to the State Governor.

Christians of SC origin form more than 75% of the Indian Christians. Oppressive structures existed not only in the society at large but also within the Church. The plight of SC Christians were not followed up by appropriate actions by the individual church bodies. The President of the NCCI and the CBCI are complacent on this whole issue. But fortunately some individuals, action groups and study institutes have continued at least some discussion of this issue. Thus can be mentioned the All-India Federation of Associations of SC Christians, Trichy, the publication of books like *The Twice Alienated* by Dr. Wilson of Hyderabad, the setting up of a Diocean-level department in Madras called 'Justice for the Oppressed'. The All-India Tamil Nadu Conference of the Christians of SC origin in January 1982 at Vellore and the very significant 'caste-class study programme' by the CISRS in Bangalore which has been publishing their results through a document called *Samata*, since 1981. I am sure there are other such activities relating to this problem of SC Christians in other parts of India. Then of course the very important contribution in facing this problem came from the Christian Conference of Asia-URM when they organised a workshop on

the role of religion in national harmony (1981) in Sri Lanka when the struggle of all the Untouchables and tribals in South Asia as a whole was studied in depth.

## II. Brahmin Christians:

Even though Christianity entered India as early as 52 AD through the Apostle St. Thomas, the membership of the St. Thomas Christianity strictly confined itself to higher caste groups in India's south-western coast. Bishop Stephen Neil says in his book, *History of Christian Mission*, that when Francis Xavier reached Cranganur about 1552 he learnt that there were about 1,00,000 Christians in the Malabar coast all drawn from higher castes. The Bishop further says that only with the beginning of the Catholic mission in the Goa region and later on in the Cape Comorin coastal region, the lower caste Hindus like fishermen were converted to Christianity. However, for the next 150 years, the successive Roman Catholic missionaries including Henry Henricus, Robert De Nobili, Beschi and others had been gaining converts both from the higher castes but mostly from the lower and outcaste (Untouchables) groups in South India. Specifically through the influence of men like Robert De Nobili who took on a Brahminical attire and attitudes seeking to be a missionary to the Brahmins, the Catholic Church was committed to the policy of maintaining caste distinctions even among the Hindu converts. Thus caste divisions within the Christian Church was recognised and legitimised both historically and theologically. But when by 1706 the German missionaries landed on the eastern shores of South India at Tranquebar, they already found the existence of the Catholic Church which had accepted the caste distinctions among its members. So much so, even the first Church built at Tranquebar by Zeigenbalg as a Lutheran Protestant Church named New Jerusalem had a middle wall of partition through a railing that segregated the outcaste Untouchable converts from the higher castes. These

outcastes were drawn from those groups known as SCs since that phrase was used for the first time in the Government of India Act of 1935. It is the same people whom M. K. Gandhi had unwittingly 'branded' as *Harijans* (children of God) by using a poetic expression borrowed from a Gujarati Brahmin writer who so described the orphans, the fatherless and the destitutes. Ironically even the pietistic German missionaries who considered every believer and convert being made in the image of god with equal human dignity and rights with every other person had to yield to the observance of caste divisions following the Roman Catholic Church in South India. However Zeigenbalg was challenged by a fellow missionary called Benjamin Shultze who objected to the service of Holy Communion through separate cups for SC Christians at the New Jerusalem Church in Tranquebar and parted company from him to start a congregation of his own in Vepery, Madras.

Thus began the protest against caste within the Church as early as in the first quarter of the 18th century. At the close of that century came William Carey and his team to Bengal inaugurating what is known as the 'Modern Missionary Movement'. But the very fact that William Carey and others came as literatures and educators coming in first contact with the elitist Sanskritic culture, meant they were confronted with the caste culture of Hinduism.

Almost 100 years after Carey or 200 years after the German missionaries in the South or 350 years after the advent of the Roman Catholic missionaries in Goa, the famous Pandita Ramabai gives an insight into the state of Indian Christianity nearly 100 years ago in her book, *High Caste Hindu Women* (1888). She says: 'In ancient times persons were assigned to each of the four castes according to their individual capacity and merit independent of the accident of birth'. Later on, when caste became an article of the Hindu faith it assumed the formidable proportions which now prevail everywhere in India. Transgressors of caste rules from the highest to the

lowest are subject to excommunication and severe punishment. Offenders by inter-marriage or change of faith are without redemption. It must also be borne in mind that if a Brahmin marries a lower caste (which Ramabai herself experienced) girl or eats or drinks with any of them, he is despised and shunned as an outcaste, not only by his own caste but also by the low caste with whose members he has entered into such relation. The low caste people will look down upon this Brahmin as a 'lawless wretch'. So deeply rooted is this customs in the heart of every orthodox Hindu that he is not in any way offended by the disrespect shown him by a high caste man, since he recognises in it only what is ordered by religion. For although 'caste' is confessedly an outgrowth of social order, it has now become the first great article of the Hindu all over India. Caste and untouchability have their theological foundation in Hindu religion.

Thoughtful men like the Buddha, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya and others rebelled against this tyrannical custom and proclaimed the gospel of social equality of all humans but the 'caste' proved too strong for them. Their disciples at the present day (the Buddhists, the Sikhs and the reformed Hindu sects) are as much subject to caste as are any other orthodox Hindus. Even the Muslims have not escaped this tyrant; they too are divided into several castes and are as strict as the Hindus in their observances. Over a million Hindu converts to Christianity, members of the Roman Catholic Church are more or less ruled by caste. The Protestant missionaries likewise found it difficult in early days to overcome caste prejudice among their converts and not many years ago in the Madras Presidency clergymen were compelled to use different cups for each separate caste when they celebrated the 'Lord's Supper' (quoted by S. M. Adhav in his biography of Pandita Ramabai, pages 92 to 93, CISRS & CLS, Madras, 1979).

Now almost 100 years after Ramabai's description of the Indian Church, the condition cannot be said to have changed

very much. Most sadly even within the world—renowned and forward-looking Church of South India there still exist the caste-ridden vestiges of Hinduism. I have recently learnt with deep pain and shock that specifically in four of out of 21 dioceses, two in Kerala and two in Tamil Nadu, separate worshipping centres or Churches are being used for separate congregations in the same locality within the distance of a furlong or two. The implication is obvious that the attitudes of caste divisions among Christians seem to be not at all different from those of the orthodox Hindus.

In the *Samata* (1981/2 issue) article of Rev. Dr. Abraham Ayrookuzhial presented at the CCA-URM Consultation in Sri Lanka in 1981, he refers to the reports from another CISRS consultation in Bangalore when case studies on the struggles of Untouchables or outcaste Christians in their local Church life, one at Sawyarpuram near Tuticorin and another in Wynad in Kerala, in both cases, the higher caste groups of Christians are identified as openly dominating and oppressing and exploiting the SC fellow Christians in the same local congregations.

The SC Christians are thus discriminated against and oppressed by the fellow Christians within the very Church for no fault of their own but the accident of birth, even when they are 2nd, 3rd or 4th generation Christians. The high caste Christians who are in a minority in the Church carry their caste prejudices even after generations, unaffected by the Christian belief and practice. Ironically, even the oppressed SC Christians carry their inferiority complex resignedly accepting their inherited servility from the Hindu background having internalised the legitimising myths and beliefs in 'fate and karma' that domesticate them into a 'culture of silence.'

Thus the problem with the SC Christians is not only that they are discriminated against and looked down upon by their

own fellow Christians but they themselves have acquiesced to their subordinate and servile status in society, even within the Church society. Perhaps such was the condition of the people whom Jesus described as 'Sheep without the Shepherd' (Mark : 6-4) and as people not knowing the difference between the right hand and the left.

Yet another serious problem with the SC Christians is that they are also divided among themselves into different subsects like their Hindu counterparts. They observe caste discrimination against one another equally strongly if not more like all other Hindus. It is a classical example of the oppressed being ruled by the values of the oppressor. It is a sad spectacle to see the Christians of Andhra Pradesh mostly SCs polarised into subcastes of Malas and Madigas. (*Caste in Andhra Church*. P. A. Augustine, Samata, 3/1984. CISRS Publication, Bangalore). This condition of lack of self-awareness and self-discrimination does not mean they lack intelligence or brain power. It only means that they were left with the need for developing leaders and leadership skills among them.

### III. The Plight of the Outcaste Untouchables Today :

Such a condition of the SC Christians is nothing but the exact mirroring of the plight of the Untouchable groups in Hinduism. Rabindranath Tagore had described the caste system as 'a gigantic system of cold-blooded repression' and was of the opinion that regeneration of the Indian people directly and perhaps solely depended upon its removal. But how did this society degenerate to that level? And, is it ever possible to remove this repressive caste system?

Having been left to stew in their own juice for some 3,000 years by the Hindu graded allocation of hierarchical roles by the so-called laws of Manu called the *Varnashrama-Dharma*, the Untouchables, were really not allowed to participate in the

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total life of the four Hindu castes at all. But they were the original inhabitants of this land before the Aryan invasion, belonging to the Dravidian or even the Pre-or Adi-Dravidian race. Thus these people (Untouchables) were never a part and parcel of and had nothing to do with the Hindu fold or Hindu religion. In the course of history, they became assimilated into the graded Hindu society as the fifth caste or as the Panchamas. In the process the fourth caste called the Shudras who were the servant class, were happy to accommodate these original sons of the soil as their slaves thus relegating the owners of this land as slaves of the servant class, in the Hindu graded society.

The kind of social organisation and role-assignment was made sacrosanct by the religious sanction secured by the theological assertion. The Aryan-Brahminical explanation that God is the source of the human family could not be resisted by the truly human, original people of this land. It was said the Brahmin came from the head of Brahma, the creator, the Kshatriyas, from his body, the Vysyas from the thighs and the shudras from his feet. But very subtly and deceptively the fifth section of the population was left out as having nothing to do with God as their source but were identified as *rakshasas* (demons) like Ravana in the epic of Ramayana. The fifth class was deceived into believing as people outside the pale of Indian society, as outcastes and as '*Mlechas*' and as Untouchables. They were further deceived into the belief that because of 'fate and karma' any one is born into one of these five caste groups. Only determined by fate and karma through a series of reincarnations and cycles of rebirth can any one improve his status. But certainly there is no hope for any one to move from one caste to the other upwards or downwards within this single birth in which he finds himself.

Thus it is by these Hindu religious beliefs having a theological foundation, the Indian man is imprisoned in the

caste culture of Hindu society entangled in such a strangle-hold of Hindu beliefs of religious web. Even the Christian whether of high caste is no exception to this divine rule.

Sociologists have identified three basic human faculties as being inalienable rights of every human being. These are : (1) A person's capacity to reflect, (2) the capacity to love and to make associations and (3) the capacity to make decisions.

When it comes to the SCs in India today, it is clear, he does not have the freedom to exercise any of these three innate faculties. These basic human rights are denied to him by the historical and religious role assignment in which he is caught in the Hindu society. But more particularly is the capacity to love which includes self-love is denied to him since he is not recognised as coming from God who that His image to all men. Hindu caste culture does not recognise this human dignity of the outcaste and so he is deprived of dignity and self-love since he is considered to be a means of pollution and treated as an Untouchable.

So he not only has no love for himself but is ashamed of identifying himself with another person who is likewise deprived of self-dignity. He surely finds it difficult to associate himself or identify himself with the SC person or persons. Certainly he faces an identity crisis. He is ashamed to say that he belongs to the SCs. How can we expect him when he has somehow extricated himself either by conversion or reservation benefits to take up leadership role to change the lot of his own people with no sense of belonging to them ?

It is found today that after 35 years of Independence only 2 million SCs have come up in their life through employment with Government reservation policy and other benefits

and thus changed their status in life. But they are blamed for not helping their own people who number about 200 million SC/STs. How could they be blamed since they are made to be ashamed of belonging to this community and are denied the faculty of self-love or making association even with their own people.

This is what is worrying us today.

Writing in the fortnightly journal, *Dalit Voice* (Jan. 1-15, 1984) K. Veeramani, General Secretary of Dravida Kazhagam, explains the origin and goals of his movement. "It is the considered finding of the DK that the people other than Brahmins have been subjected to social degradation and ignominy due to the Aryan (Brahminical) influence on their social, cultural and literary fields. The caste system is the root cause for the malady of the majority of the people and so Periyar (E. V. Ramaswamy) devoted much of his time towards its total abolition. To completely smash this pattern of social structure, Periyar founded the DK with its historical derivative. We are strictly following the footprints of Periyar.

"The Brahmins from the Puranic age down to the modern age have been setting one caste or community against another, following their 'divide and rule' policy and they have been so far successful in their attempts as the disunity created by them among the non-Brahmins has brought to them rich dividends to continue their exploitation. We look upon the Dravidian people as a whole and not in terms of a particular caste or community. The venom of prejudices and hatred of caste injected into the veins of the non-Brahmins by the Brahmins for ages are still dominant in their minds. Unless and until these venoms are syringed out from the veins of the people and a new blood is injected into them, the caste divisions among the people would continue."

K. Veeramani expressed concern with the serious divisions and mutual fightings among the lower caste-groups and

particularly their hatred and oppression of the outcastes (Untouchables) described now-a-days as the Dalits. That is how he explains the recent phenomenon of terrible repression and unleashing of atrocities against the outcastes by the lower caste groups, mainly the so-called Backward Classes (Shudras). Whatever the explanation the fact remains the age-old victims of injustice and oppression are being further subjected to untold misery and violence that are daily occurrences in some part or the other of this country as reported in the newspapers. The outcaste innocent children are kidnapped and killed in groups; women are raped, not infrequently by the police who are to give protection to them; youth and adult men who try to assert their human dignity are falsely accused and beaten up and assaulted and lynched by better educated propertied and land-owning higher caste people in the villages. But worse still is what the urban educated richer classes are doing against the Dalits, who try to demand their basic rights and human dignity. The "caste war" in Gujarat started over the reservations in medical college admissions; the massacre in Marathwada; the repeated criminal terrorising goondaism in Bihar; the tragic killings of outcastes in Bhiwandi; in Meerut, in Mirzapur, and in South India, the tragedy of over 40 people being burnt alive inside their hutments in Kilvenmani (near Tanjore in Tamil Nadu); the Villupuram massacres, etc. etc., all within the past few years are but a few instances of virtual last ditch battle the caste demons seem to be making to eliminate and eradicate a whole people of some 200 millions as Untouchables and unseeables. But all this take place as a response and reaction to the revolt from the long-oppressed people of outcastes. The revolt that began with great social thinkers like the Buddha, Guru Nanak, Narayana Guru and Chaitanya in earlier times, was recently being reinforced by Mahatma Jotirao Phooley, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy. They found that the ideology of social equality preached by the liberal Hindu reformers like Ranade, Tilak, Gandhi and others would not change the status of the Untouchables because caste is a religious value for the

Hindus and not merely a socio-economic institution. They felt that the image of an Untouchable as a religiously impure person had to be fought if he is to be socially emancipated. Thus within the Hindu religious framework it is impossible to redeem the human dignity of the outcastes.

Describing the plight of the Untouchables over 40 years ago, the greatest Indian after the Buddha (as V. T. Rajshekhar, Editor of the *Dalit Voice*, calls him), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, said: 'The Romans had their slaves, the Spartans their helots, the British their Villains, the Americans their Negroes, the Germans their Jews; so the Hindus their Untouchables. But none of these can be said to have called upon to face a fate which is worse than the fate which pursues the Untouchables. Slavery, serfdom, villainage, all have vanished. But untouchability still exists and bids fair to last as long as Hinduism will last.' (p. 11, *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables*,—Bhim Patrika Publications, Jallunder, India, 1943).

Can the situation really be changed? Gandhi spent a whole life time fighting against untouchability but never wanted the caste-system that mothered it changed at all. Indian Parliament legislated against untouchability making it a crime but this paper-tiger is daily challenged by the caste groups of people. Their attitudes toward their fellow citizens is not changed. But only hatred and prejudice are added by the legal provisions like the Civil Rights Act and the Reservations and concessions for this deprived and depraved outcaste people.

A most serious plight of this vast section of the outcaste people is their lack of literacy. The 1981 Census claims 36.17% literacy rate all over the country. But it would be less than 20% among this rural-based landless, casual labour class-mass of people living in their segregated ghettos away from the main village on land-site that is not their own, in unhygienic mudhutments.

At present about 52% of India's population or some 363 millions are counted as living below the poverty line, that each earning a monthly income of Rs. 86 only. But the 200-odd million outcastes people belong to the lowest rung of the ladder and so are living far, far below the subsistence level, virtually living on a single, inadequate meal a day—mostly depending on the doles from others—with no work opportunities. Since such was their plight for ages, the Indian society seem to take it for granted even as the sufferers themselves have taken it with utter inertia, apathy and resignation. This is what the *Dalit Voice* often describes as "the slaves enjoying their slavery".

#### IV. What are the responsibilities of the Church ?

As for the SC Christians and non-converted Untouchables there is hardly any difference :

(1) The existence of a people branded and bundled up as being outside the pale of Indian society is a peculiar and specific social phenomenon in the whole world. This include as many as 200 millions out of the total of 750 millions, even the Constitution of the nation identifying them separately as the Scheduled Castes (*Harijans*) and as the Scheduled Tribes (*Girijans*) and are thus recognised as having been long subjected to social oppression and, therefore, eligible to certain handicap benefits for their *self-development*.

(2) Implied in such separate *identity* is the recognition of certain dehumanising debilities like *Untouchability* social degradation with no possibility of social mobility for upward status gaining limited by (Hindu) religious dogma. In fact, this rejects a doctrine of man as being not equal and social organisation being graded and hierarchical. Thus the destiny both of man as individual and society as a whole viewed as determined by extraneous forces of Fate and Karma, and not

by man and society by themselves as the socialistic, democratic secular Constitution of this same country had assumed.

(3) A third issue that emerges is the total denial of human dignity and self-respect for a vast population in their own native land. This really means denial of basic freedom and human rights to life, property and pursuit of happiness to almost one-third of this nation's people.

(4) Yet another serious issue involved is 'the culture of silence' due to generations of exploitation and oppression resulting in domestication of the 'Scheduled' castes and tribes, so much deprived and deprived in their human spirit and psychological personality which leads them to resignation to their plight accepting it all as unchangeable and in fact legitimizing their own existence through internalising the myths and beliefs foisted on them by the dominant culture that oppressed them for thousands of years.

(5) But worst of all is the issue that the cumulative effect of all the social manipulations involving this vast population including the Constitutional guarantees given them by the State is that they are further pushed into a state of hopelessness with no clear vision of their total liberation and integration into the total society.

This arises out of not attending to the root causes of their social alienation but only scratching the problem of caste-culture with its socio-economic and political ramifications by attempts at removing untouchability and providing props like reservations and concessions. Having noted only the major issues involved, let us seek to identify some of the major concerns of the SC people of India.

Just to list a few of these concerns we may mention the following :

## **1. Their state of dependency :**

The grinding poverty and illiteracy in which all the outcastes are immersed in raises the big question : how to redeem this great mass of people from their impossible plight ? They own no land and have no job opportunities to earn their living. They are made thus to be a permanently dependent community on the doles and charities from the high castes and the Government. Thus no attempt at a basic solution for the problems of outcastes in this land has even been made. They are nowhere near becoming a self-reliant community. They are a 'no people' and God knows how can these people be made or organised into 'a people' with a self-respect and self-awareness of their self-hood.

## **2. Their lack of Self-Respect :**

The second most serious concern about the outcastes is their own lack of self understanding and self respect for themselves as part of the human family. This is a matter of the spirit, for 'man shall not live by bread alone'. It was this plight of the South Indian masses that Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, the great social reformer, had identified and agonised over and started his 'self-respect' movement to restore 'the man in man'. Giving an oration at the funeral of this 'father of the oppressed', a former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Karunanidhi, raised the question : What was the Contribution of 'Thanthai Periyar' over 50 years of his fight for the down-trodden masses ? To illustrate his point Karunanidhi described a prison-scene during the British Raj. As usual all the prisoners in a jail were kept naked and half-starved. On a festival day they were permitted to be given an undercloth and a good meal by a philanthropist. What would such prisoners do when both food and clothes were offered simultaneously. Most of them would rush out of their dingy dark rooms and grab the food, fighting like dogs. Very few cared to pickup the cloth and cover their shame.

Such also was the condition of the down-trodden masses in South India before Periyar came on the scene. It was Periyar

who helped lift the self-consciousness and self-respect of the masses since they had sunk into animal level of living. For Periyar believed, Karunanidhi said, 'man shall not live by bread alone'. More than food, man needed self-dignity and self-esteem. Periyar and all his followers, therefore, were fighting for this basic liberation of the masses. Now when Jesus Christ declared that 'Man shall not live by bread alone' did He not call attention to the need of every man and woman being raised to the self-understanding of his or her own self-dignity and worth given by the Creator. And is not this Christ still relevant to India?

However, Periyar himself came from the Shudra caste groups and he and his followers concentrated on working for the liberation of the Shudra section of the population, thus by and large neglecting this outcaste people. As mentioned earlier, the Brahmins also through their policy of 'divide and rule' had sent a wedge between these two peoples to break this movement.

### **3. Their Lack of Leadership :**

Lack of leadership from their own ranks is the other most serious concern with the outcastes in India. Until the emergence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar from the 'Mahar' sub-sect of the outcastes of Maharashtra in the decades before Independence, there were, in all history, no leaders at all from this people. Even the earlier champions of outcastes from the great Buddha downwards to the E. V. R. of Tamil Nadu, all the leaders who fought to liberate these masses were from the other--mostly upper caste groups. You see it takes a Hebrew Moses to help liberate the oppressed Hebrew people and a Black Negro, Martin Luther King, to help liberate the fellow American Black people. By the very mandate of the Creator, who has given the freedom of will to man, man has to work out his own salvation, of course with God working with Man (Phil. 2).

## V. Church's response to the issues and concerns of the outcastes :

As pointed out earlier the problems and prospects for the liberation of the SC Christians are much the same as with the outcastes (both *Harijans* and *Girijans*) outside the Christian fold, since both the sections suffer and share the same plight of caste oppression.

However, the Church in India, which is a tiny minority of about 20 million people with 75% of its membership being outcastes, has perhaps to follow the ancient wisdom of 'Charity begins at home'. But it must only begin and not end at home.

It must be recognised that the outcaste Christians actually suffer from double injustice. (*Twice Alienated* by Dr. K. Wilson, OUB flat No. 1., Osmania University Campus, Hyderabad-500 007)

**Double Injustice :** While the Government of the land discriminates against the SC Christians based on religion, ironically the Christians drawn from the higher caste groups into the Church, though a minority themselves, discriminate, exploit and oppress and take advantage over the poor outcastes – all based on caste superiority which is not earned by them but merely an accident of birth. Deprived and dispossessed of all property and land, serving as slaves and labourers for the higher caste groups of masters, whether Hindus or Christians, who somehow own and manage their inherited and mostly unearned properties and wealth. Outcaste people work hard and sweat their blood to provide easy and soft living for the high caste people but are further deprived and dehumanised. Devoid of human dignity and self-respect these social outcastes people have lost even the will to fight, let alone gaining initiative to liberate themselves.

Therefore, the God of the Bible who takes deliberately the side with the poor and the oppressed has given the

mandate through Christ, the Lord of the Church, when He spelt out the purpose and goals of His Mission, which is also to be the Mission of the Church, when he read the *Manifesto of God's Mission*, at the Nazareth Synagogue (Luke 4:18-21). The same mandate was reiterated in His parable of the Last Judgement (Math 25:35-45) and insisted that 'whatever you do unto the least of My brethren you have done unto Me'.

I had earlier said that charity must begin at home. Indeed both historically and theologically such a course of action for the Church is abundantly justified.

In the Old Testament, the law of Moses is not shy of stipulating that 'If in any of the towns in the land that the Lord has given you there is a fellow-Israelite in need then do not be selfish and refuse to help him' (Deut. 15:7, also read Levit 25:35).

Nor is the New Testament ashamed to acknowledge the need to help one's fellow Christians in need. In fact there are specific instructions on this. At one place (Luke 12:42) Jesus Himself asks, 'who then is that faithful and wise steward who his Lord shall make ruler over His household to give them their portion of meal in due season?' Sharing the resources within the house-hold is commended thus by our Lord as being faithful and wise stewardship. St. Paul had spared no opportunity to make collection of funds from fellow Christians, of Macedonia and Achaia to help the poor Christians of Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26) (II Cor. 9:1). He did not think it is being selfish or communal minded to care for the poor within the Church (Gal. 2:10). In fact He insisted saying 'Let us do good unto all men especially unto them who are of the household of God' (Gal. 6:10). He makes it clear therefore that it is the duty and responsibility of fellow Christians to support and help the poorer and the oppressed and victimised among them. And St. James, that first Bishop of Jerusalem, also confirmed this Christian duty in his Epistle (James 2:15, 16 and Ch. 1:26).



## THE AUTHOR

The Rev. M. Azariah (1934) is one of India's Black theologians—angry but determined. Following High School Education at St. Columba's, Chengalpattu, he joined the Madras Christian College, Tambaram, where he was a SCM leader, and obtained his Bachelor's Degree in Economics from the University of Madras. After three years of secular work as Co-operative Inspector and as a Social Welfare Officer, he joined the United Theological College, Bangalore, for Ministerial Training. He was ordained Deacon in 1962, and as Presbyter in 1963 in the Diocese of Madras of the CSI. He served for 12 years in Rural and Urban Pastorates including at the St. George's Cathedral, Madras. He also served as Chaplain to the Bishop Lesslie Newbigin for a period before taking up as Associate Director of the Community Service Centre, an Ecumenical Lay Training Centre in Madras. Then he was called to be the Education Secretary of the National Christian Council of India, for a term. Later he served as the Auxiliary Secretary of the Tamil Nadu branch of the Bible Society of India, until he was called to serve as the General Secretary of the CSI Synod. Rev. Azariah has done his Postgraduate theological studies at the Virginia Episcopal Seminary in the United States and has also taken M.A. Degree in English Literature from the Madras University. He is widely travelled.